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Is this play? Hazing in French Preparatory Schools

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There are, presumably, various ways in which “privileged” ritual contexts can be established and maintained. One way, which I will illustrate here, consists in a formal complexification of ordinary ludic behavior in which participants are led not to simulate activities which they are presumed to not really feel, but rather, to pretend to simulate situations that truly affect them. Certain ritual performances can thus be understood as a variety of meta-play: a conventionalized embedding of play within itself.

The example I wish to consider is French scholastic hazing (*bizutage*), practice brought to my attention while doing work on ritually inflicted pain (Houseman 1985, 1998a, 1998b). In a number of prestigious French schools, upperclassmen submit first year students to a series of hardships involving a fair degree of physical and psychological suffering. One of the intriguing features of this behavior, which has recently received considerable attention by the press and law-makers, is that its very nature remains unclear, both for the participants and for outside observers: is it ritual, play or outright abuse?, is it functionally essential or spurious?, is it contemporary or vestigial? Scholastic hazing thus provides a highly ambiguous and therefore especially interesting case for exploring certain aspects of ritual action.

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Although there are variations from one school to the next, the overall pattern of hazing activities, which take place during the first several weeks of school, is much the same:

Within the confines of the school grounds, the new students are made to undergo fake classes or exams, to listen to interminable abusive speeches, to obey ambiguous orders instantly, to learn scatological and sexual « hymns » by heart, and to submit to a series of distressing trials: endless push-ups, squats, and wheel-barrows, crawling on ones stomach through muddy or dry river-beds, immersions in cold water, and so forth. Their sleep is systematically interrupted and they are made to eat very quickly, usually without tableware and/or with their hands attached. While the upperclassmen in charge of hazing are dressed up as military personnel, inquisitors, Ku Klux Klan members, or « skinheads », the new students are obliged to wear plastic garbage bags, as well as diapers on their heads or between their legs. At regular intervals they are bombarded with eggs, flour, shaving cream, mercurochrome, ketchup, mayonnaise, manure, and so forth. They are forced into a variety of disgusting or humiliating acts, such as bathing in cow blood, having to rub their faces against rotted animals, handling maggots, eating pet food, stripteases, reading pornographic texts out loud, simulations of oral and anal sex, of castration. While submitting to these abuses, the new students are enjoined to exhibit a constant cheerfulness; typically, they are obliged to express thanks to the upperclassmen and to sing joyous songs of the type “the more I suffer, the better I feel”.

Hazing invariably includes forays into the street, which I will come to later on. It usually cumulates with some particularly dreadful ordeal, often following a burlesque and humiliating trial or inquisition: the forced consumption of a particularly disgusting

school soup¹, the drinking of « urine » secretly replaced by beer, being « branded » with a hot iron replaced at the last moment (and unknown to the hazee) by a piece of ice, and so on. Hazing ends with a « reconciliation party » between the upperclassmen and the new students during which boisterous drunkenness and sexual license are the rule (for more ample descriptions, cf. for example Dupé 1992; Larguèze 1995a, 1995b; Rivière 1995; Wacziarg 1995).

Such hazing, absent from almost all liberal arts universities in France, is found chiefly in professional schools and in the preparatory schools that precede them. Dating from at least the end of the 19th century, fruitlessly condemned by a series of ministerial decrees beginning in 1928 and nominally outlawed since 1997, it remains a widespread phenomenon. A recent survey of found that out of 170 institutions of higher education, 90% organize a « more or less severe » hazing; about one fourth of the total population of French students is involved (Davidenkoff and Junghans 1992).

I will concentrate on hazing as currently practiced in preparatory schools at which, for a two-year period following the baccalaureate, select students intensely prepare the entrance examinations for the elite institutions of French higher education: the *grandes écoles*. Not only is this a particular exemplary case, for which there exist a number of good eye-witness accounts, but the sociological framework of power relations in which such schools and their students are imbedded has been comprehensively described, notably by Bourdieu (1989; cf. also Cuche 1985).

In close to 600 pages, Bourdieu traces out in statistical detail the continuities between social origin, cultural capital, scholastic achievement, and professional fortune which underlie the construction and reproduction of a « nobility of state » (*la noblesse d'état*), that is, the main players in the fields of industrial and political power. Elite preparatory schools in which young people are prepared to enter this arena of power, play a crucial role in this process. For Bourdieu, the pedagogical activities of such institutions -- supremely efficient, he suggests, mainly because they are applied for the most part to those who, as he says, are « already converted » -- consist above all in an act of consecration, that is, in the legitimate production/recognition of persons of superior essence, ready to assume the positions of power for which they are « naturally » (in fact, socially) preordained. This self-fulfilling « social magic » of elite schooling, in which isolation, social homogenization, intense competition, self-control and mastery over others, all have a role to play, is likened to an act of dubbing, or again, to a vast initiation or « institution » rite (Bourdieu 1986), the important aspect of which is not the passage of novices from one category to another, but the underlying discrimination this passage presupposes, that between those who are destined to be initiated and those who by their very nature, are excluded. Thus, for Bourdieu, preparatory schools are best seen as « relay screens » which, under the guise of strict neutrality, at the same time dissimulate and give new life to the connection between privileged social origin and the monopolization of professional positions of power. The hazing activities which mark the entry into such schools, he suggests, constitute « the most visibly ritualized aspect » of this process of auto-consecration or institutionalization.

Unfortunately, Bourdieu does not expand on this idea, such that it remains unclear just how hazing fulfills this at once renewing and masking role. Unlike certain other aspects of

¹ Among the best known of these concoctions is the infamous “Stan’s soup” whose public consumption in the Luxembourg gardens is one of the final acts of the hazing performed at the Parisian Lycée Stanislas: 3 kilograms of dog food, 2 boxes of cat food, 500 grams of decaffeinated coffee, 3 packages of marshmallows, one boiled pig’s head, 3 boiled pig’s tibias, 3 boiled chicken heads, 12 liters of vegetable oil, 3 liters of vinegar, 6 liters of milk, 12 liters of Coca-Cola, 2 liters of red wine, 100 milliliters of Tabasco hot sauce, 500 milliliters of cod-liver oil, 250 milligrams of nicotine tablets, 2 and a half liters of beer and bicarbonate of soda.

preparatory school life, hazing is neither a strait-forward expression of the structures of domination he calls attention to (nor even their inversion), nor, given its elective and overtly burlesque character, can it be said to provide the necessary grounds for their realization. It is not enough to evoke, as he does, the «social magic» of ritualized behavior; one must also try to show how it works. To do so, it is necessary to look to hazing behavior itself.

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The following episode, drawn from near the beginning of the hazing period at a preparatory school in the Paris suburbs (Wacziarg 1995), gives some idea of the highly peculiar emotional tone that imbues such practices:

In total silence, the blindfolded students are led around the grounds and buildings in single file, at times on their knees. They end up with their noses pressed up against a wall. Suddenly, high-pitched shouts in an almost incomprehensible language (with Zs inserted in every word) fill the air; they are copiously insulted and told to keep their arms in the air and their feet “pi over two, assholes” (i.e. at a 180 degree angle). Following an endless speech on their utter worthlessness and the importance of “co-responsibility”, the new students’ are called one by one, answering to their name with « a total asshole here, sir » (*tout con mon CDBI*, a CDBI being the *Chargé du bizutage intensif*). In turn, each new student is dragged off to the side and made to kneel. When the blindfold is taken off, he/she finds him/herself in front of a tribunal composed of a dozen or so upperclassmen in military getup, some with heads shaved and baseball bats in hand, others with impersonal, neutral face masks. The leader, the judge, points to the kneeling student: “Asshole. Guilty. Execution”. While the student’s arms are firmly held, large amounts of eggs, flour, ketchup, mint syrup and cod-liver oil are poured on his/her head; a hot pepper is stuffed in his/her mouth and he/she is shoved to the side to join the other previously “executed” students, disoriented, dismayed, with heads bowed. Once all the executions are over, the upperclassmen start screaming anew. The new students are then led in single file to “a new pleasure”: the “Rio Disgusto” (*Rio Crado*). They must crawl on their stomachs along a dry river-bed filled with rocks and thorny bushes, holding onto the ankles of the person in front and singing « this is the easy life, I hope it lasts forever; the more I crawl the more I cum », while the upperclassmen shout and make fun of them. Most begin bleeding at their elbows and knees. This ordeal is followed by a session of push-ups in which the upperclassmen break eggs on the heads of those who perform the exercises too slowly. Any attempt to rebel is immediately met with a new « execution » and further tribulations.

In order to understand behavior such as this, I would like to begin with G. Bateson’s brief and somewhat obscure observation that the hazing of initiation is “constructed not upon the premise ‘This is play’, but rather around the question “‘Is this play?’” (1972:182). Indeed, I suspect this insight owes less to the study of far-away initiation rites than it does to his own experiences of hazing in British public schools. Bateson describes the meta-message “This is play” in the following terms: “These actions, in which we are now engaged, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote. The playful nip denotes the bite, but does not denote what would be denoted by the bite [e.g. intention to harm]” (1972:180). In the case of hazing, however, something like the reverse of this seems to apply. Being solemnly “executed” for example by having all sorts of garbage dumped on one’s head, *does not* denote being put to death, but *does* denote what would be denoted by being put to death, namely total submission to the violent authority of the upperclassmen.

The interactive pattern and emotional tone of hazing is a highly paradoxical one. On the one hand, from a formal point of view, hazing activities are patently factitious. Characterized by burlesque attitudes and laughable exaggeration, these events are ostensibly undertaken in a common spirit of play and a farcical good time. The facetiousness of hazing is further corroborated by its theoretically voluntary nature: the hardships of hazing are, as some participants put it, « symbolic », and in this respect stand in opposition to the « real » ordeals of preparatory schools which are the examinations and their preparation.

At the same time, however, there is no doubt that hazing entails considerable psychological and physical suffering. The new students' feelings of apprehension, disorientation, pain and humiliation on the one hand, and the upperclassmen's feelings of anticipation, authoritarian righteousness and sadistic enjoyment on the other, can not be denied. In this experiential sense, the violences committed, while of an apparently « playful » character, are nonetheless unquestionably real. Thus, the newcomers are purposely pushed to the breaking point (as one participant observed: « Everyone breaks down at one time or another », Warciarg 1995:58), and acts of rebellion (« I don't want to play any more ») are immediately crushed by further violence.

The new students' position is a particularly difficult one: they must treat the truly disagreeable ordeals they endure lightheartedly, all the while according the utmost seriousness to the blatantly loony « customs » of their school. The underlying « rules » of hazing are clearly contradictory: while positive emotional states -- student solidarity, amusement, etc. -- are to be collectively exhibited by means of obviously phony activities, individuals' tangible negative experiences of these activities -- pain, humiliation, etc. -- are to be outwardly disavowed. The more severe the hazing and the longer it lasts, the more untenable this position becomes. Increasingly, the new students don't know what to think or feel. Hence their overriding concern: « how far will it go? ».

The appropriate response to this situation, or at least that adopted fairly quickly by the leaders among the new students, and progressively by the others as well, consists in anticipating or pre-empting the upperclassmen in doing violence to themselves: the new students defiantly ask for more. They are thus led to internalize their persecutors' role. In doing so, they behave as though the actions they are engaged in were a type of game -- as though the pains they endure were a source of pleasure --, all the while knowing (and knowing that the others also know) that they are no such thing. In short, they (seriously) play at playing. They meta-play. Because of the distresses involved, the new students are unable to merely pretend that the upperclassmen are inflicting suffering upon them. They are forced to *pretend* to pretend that this is so. In other words, the activities they are involved in become, for them, neither simple simulations nor outright mistreatments, but something else, in between: feigned simulations of truly hurtful performances.

In this way, the new students become not only physically but also affectively and conceptually caught up in events to which they can not but attribute a measure of « serious » meaningfulness, the exact nature of which remains nonetheless unclear. The hazing activities themselves, their experience of them, are undeniably real. However, the question whereby these activities may be adequately defined -- « Is this play? » -- remains unresolved. As one participant put it: « in the end, the essential character of hazing remains obscure: is it fun or is it traumatic? ».

Direction for this presumed meaningfulness which the experience of hazing engenders is provided, I suggest, by the system of relationships its performance enacts, system to which I now turn.

The interactions of scholastic hazing are grounded in what C. Severi and I have elsewhere called the process of « ritual condensation », understood as a simultaneous acting out of nominally contrary modes of relationship (Houseman and Severi 1998). These events take

place within the closed and greatly simplified universe of the school grounds. On the one hand, all contacts with persons outside the school are strictly forbidden. On the other hand, the school authorities themselves -- administrators, teachers, etc. -- are also pointedly absent. While the latter are of course aware of the hazing activities, they never take part in them and for the most part, pretend that they do not exist, the whole episode being treated as a case of students «doing their own thing». Thus for example, when upperclassmen burst into classrooms in order to submit the new students to various hardships, the teachers discreetly leave (“with an indulgent smile” [Wacziarg 1995:74]), abandoning their pupils to the mercies of the upperclassmen. Indeed, with the school faculty out of the picture, it is the upperclassmen themselves who act as the school’s official representatives and repositories of its traditions. As attested by the mock classes and fake exams they submit the new students to, the upperclassmen occupy with respect to the new students a position similar to that occupied by their own superiors, the school authorities, with respect to themselves. However, as the caricatural and bogus nature of their behavior towards the new students also suggests, the upperclassmen do not simply take the place of the school authorities. Rather, they act at once as school authorities towards students *and* as students amongst themselves. Reciprocally, in the absence of persons not connected with the school, the new students’ behavior identifies them both as students facing other students, *and* as outsiders, obliged to submit to insider customs of which they are ignorant. Thus, if hazing as a particular mode of intimidation implies a simultaneity of contradictory injunctions -- encapsulated in the question «Is this play?» -- it is because its performance entails the condensation of normally antithetical modes of relationship: that between faculty and students and that between students themselves, between hierarchical authority and symmetrical communality, between insider/insider and insider/outsider relations.

Now, I have suggested that «pretending to pretend» as the new students are led to do, entails a virtual internalization of the upperclassmen’s position with respect to themselves. In this respect, hazing behavior implies a still further relational identification, namely that between the upperclassmen as representatives of the school authorities, and the harassed newcomers themselves. At the same time, I have argued that by «pretending to pretend», these new students are caused to attribute a degree of meaningfulness to the hazing activities they undergo. One implication of this is that whereas they may deem themselves as having acquired some type of understanding (exactly what remains unsure), there are others who, because they are excluded from hazing, have not. The new students are fully aware for example that there are some members of the general public for whom hazing is merely a semblance of violence, and others for whom it is but a case of strait out abuse. They themselves, however, like the upperclassmen and all those who have undergone such things, presume to know better: in some mysterious way it is both. These potentialities of the hazing process -- on the one hand the new students’ identification with their aggressors, and on the other, their occupying a hierarchically superior position with respect to hypothetical others -- are actualized when, after a while, hazing activities are moved onto the public scene.

At one point, generally towards the end of the hazing period, the new students leave the school grounds to appear in group in public, either by themselves or discreetly accompanied by upperclassmen. Abundantly soiled, they parade noisily through the streets, doing exercises and singing the pornographic and scatological «hymns» they learned inside. They pompously declare their undying love to passersby, try to sell them sheets of toilet paper, used condoms, bottle tops, and so forth, or alternatively, try to get people to help them to gather a set of particularly incongruous objects such as a five-person couch, a certificate of virginity, a nude photograph of Madonna, etc. Here, the new students are no longer brutally intimidated by others as they were inside. On the contrary, it is they themselves who, in displaying

themselves as the objects of hazing, behave as aggressors towards the attending public: they offend passersby by their disgusting appearance and smell, as well as by their obscene singing, they obstruct traffic and pedestrians alike, they forcefully impose themselves upon people with bizarre requests, and so on. In this sequence, it is no longer the upperclassmen who act at once as school authorities and as students towards the newcomers, but the newcomers who act as *full-fledged* students, that is, at once as hazees *and* as hazers, towards anonymous outsiders.

These displays by which the new students publicly proclaim their elite school identity, are a source of intense pride and a time of complicity with the upperclassmen. Within the school grounds, the newcomers, faced with the harmfulness of the upperclassmen's playful hostility, are led to pretend to pretend that the upperclassmen inflict suffering upon them. Play becomes embedded within itself. Outside, in assuming both their own and the upperclassmen's roles, they *play* at such hazing. As one participant observes, they undertake a « sham hazing [in which] they are not victims but accomplices » (Warcziarg 1995:26). Their actions are thus characterized by a still further embedding: they undertake a simulation of hazing which, itself, consists in the simulation of a feigned infliction of pain. In other words, they pretend [to pretend [to pretend that the upperclassmen inflict suffering upon them]]. This higher-order type of meta-play, however, entails a reorientation of the violence involved: acting both as hazees *and* as hazers, the newcomers inflict true discomfort upon the onlooking public. In this way, the new students place members of the general public in a position similar to that which they themselves occupied within the school grounds: they forcibly provoke these outsiders to do something like what they themselves were led to do inside, that is, to pretend that the aggressions they submit them to are but harmless play.

Because such provocations are purportedly offered in a spirit of fun, it is difficult for solicited onlookers not to consent to them to some degree. Indeed, even a passive reaction on the part of the public implies a tacit acquiescence to the aggressions the students impose upon them. To act otherwise is to risk an escalation of violence and further discomfort by becoming oneself an active part of the distressing spectacle one would like to avoid. However, as might be expected, members of the public are of two minds.

Some people, notably those who are familiar with such goings on, who indeed may have been through hazings themselves, recognize themselves in the students' antics. Identifying with their aggressors in this way, they allow themselves to be (playfully) coerced into adopting a pretending-to-pretend stance. In doing so, they become virtual insiders: in attributing a special, although largely undefined meaningfulness to the violences they are submitted to (as neither simple play nor strait out abuse), they implicitly place themselves in a hierarchically superior position with respect to hypothetical others who lack such understanding. In other words, they situate themselves on the side of the privileged elite associated with the schools whose students put on these performances.

Other people however, the majority perhaps, refuse such a complicity. While submitting more or less passively to the aggressive attentions of the new students, they reject an identification with them. In refusing to adopt the position of virtual hazees, such persons place themselves firmly in the camp of unprivileged outsiders. For them, the students' behavior, which they do not pretend to understand, amounts to either contemptible foolishness or abusive misconduct. They themselves, because of who they are and feel themselves to be, would neither behave in such a fashion nor be allowed to do so. It is worth noting that this stance is made largely unavailable to the new students themselves during their hazing in the school yard at the hands of upperclassmen. Those newcomers who do adopt it at that time, who thus experience their hazing simply as torture or traumatic abuse, generally end up leaving the school; in this sense hazing is also a process of selection. However, once hazing moves onto the public scene, where the interactive situation is a much more open one and the

aggressions much less severe, such a negative attitude on the part of onlookers is not only possible, but at times tacitly encouraged.

In this way, the discomforts incurred by the new students' public appearance transform spectators into participants. Caught up in the hazing events, they, like the students themselves, are forcibly induced to abandon neutrality and to situate themselves with respect to the social discriminations associated with such actions. The social inequalities that lie at the basis of preparatory schools are thereby brought to life, not in an abstract fashion, but through individuals' personal assessments of self and others, in which considerations of social origin and upbringing play a predominant role. This is so, I suggest, not only for those who are present at such scenes, but also for those who anticipate their occurrence or who hear about them afterwards. Indeed, even talking about violent hazing, because it involves the deliberate infliction of suffering, tends to lead people to take idiosyncratic pro or con positions, thereby inevitably locating themselves along a common social scale (cf. Boltanski 1993).

This may help to account for one aspect of scholastic hazing: while remaining conceptually unclear, it nonetheless acts to propagate existing social disparities by inducing participants to commit themselves to assessments of themselves and others in which the discriminations underlying these disparities are systematically applied.

But what of the complementary, « dissimulating » aspect of hazing? The new students' preeminent status is acted out in a decidedly circuitous fashion. The new students' public appearances are unquestionably violent: they do not so much solicit onlookers' approval, for example, by dressing up in fine clothes and putting on a sumptuous parade, as they forcefully impose such approval upon them. They are not exhibited as the elite representatives of society at large in such a way that recognizes the latter's legitimizing role. Instead, it is as though their hazing experience has made them into the new members of another, smaller and separate society, standing over and above that to which the general public belongs, and to which the usual norms of behavior do not apply. A line of separation is thus implicitly drawn between the public at large, and all those -- new students, upperclassmen, and administrators -- associated with preparatory schools. At the same time, however, in asserting their preeminence by means of *playful* violence, rather than, say, by beating people up or damaging property, the new students make plain the fact that they are but *students* who have yet to successfully complete their elite education. Indeed, the only true members of this supposed meritocracy are the school personnel, all of whom are in principle preparatory school alumni. A line of separation is thereby also drawn between such certified insiders, pointedly absent from hazing, and all those who participate in these proceedings -- new students, upperclassmen and members of the general public alike.

By enacting these further distinctions, hazing emphasizes the transitional nature of the new students and hence, the critical role played by the scholastic institution itself. The social evaluations they and members of the participating public are led to make during such events become bound up with discriminations in which relative privilege is linked not to social origin but to the scholastic experience itself. The vexations endured by students during their hazing may thus be envisaged as an allegory for the adversities they are destined to face in the intense preparation of examinations whose success is far from assured. According to this logic, it is by virtue of their willing submission to the grueling exigencies of such preparatory institutions, that they are made to acquire the necessary aptitudes to legitimately exercise power in the public domain. Thus, hazing makes a connection both between the factitious trials the new students undergo and the very real hardships they will bear thereafter, and concomitantly, between the playfully coercive attitude they adopt towards members of the public and the influence they are destined to wield following their successful graduation. In this light, it seems appropriate that the upperclassmen who organize scholastic hazings are

typically third year students, that is, former second year students who have failed their exams (they get one extra year to try again). It is thus those students who are at once the most fully accomplished in their training and who have acquired a personal knowledge of the fullest pain select schooling can afford, who are in charge of communicating something of this understanding to new insiders, who in turn, are able to communicate something of it to those outside.

In this way, whereas on one level, hazing acts to confirm the link between scholastic and professional preeminence and social origin, on another level, it does just the opposite: the new students' position of privilege is represented not as a reactualization of preexisting social differences, but as a painfully acquired entitlement deriving from the arduous experience of preparatory school life itself.

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In a series of violent, factitious demonstrations of statutory superiority, scholastic hazing acts out a series of hierarchical relationships: between students, between students and members of the public, between school personnel and the students and the public, and between members of the public themselves. In doing so, it integrates these various ties into a unitary network. In other words, hazing gives rise to a new relational totality in which social and professional privilege on the one hand and the formative capacities of select educational institutions on the other, may be appreciated as the interdependent aspects of a single whole. For the participants, the exact nature of hazing, in which the link between birthright and preparatory schooling is at once confirmed and denied, is far from clear (is this play?). Correspondingly, the complex yet necessary connection between social origin, elite school attendance and professional achievement that is materialized in this ritual enactment remains difficult to define. Nevertheless, to the extent that the participants' physical and emotional experience of hazing leads them to attribute a degree of personal meaningfulness to such performances, the reality of this connection becomes, for them, undeniable.

In this light (and the same may be said for many rituals), scholastic hazing is best viewed neither as producing a particular message to be deciphered, nor as buttressing existing social structures directly, but rather as establishing a contextual reference for discourse and action taking place beyond hazing behavior itself, but predicated upon the relational network actualized during its performance. Hazing in itself does not orient participants towards any particular understanding of the connection between social origin and academic or professional achievement. Instead, it provides a concrete, experiential grounding for their commitment to the presumption that these two aspects of social life are related to each other in a circular fashion. It acts as an emotionally invested touchstone for representations and assertions to the effect that privileged social position on the one hand, and preparatory school education and the professional advantages accruing from it on the other, are not joined in a theoretically contingent, external or causal relationship, but in an internal or constitutive one. In other words, I would submit that as a result of people's (willing or unwilling) participation in hazing activities, it becomes easier for them to entertain certain emergent, discriminatory propositions regarding the basis of the necessary interrelationship of social background and academic or professional success: the idea for example that efficient training for positions of power requires students with particular innate capabilities, or inversely, that inborn aptitudes for leadership demand special types of schooling.

Thus, by ritually reframing the link between privileged social origin, preparatory schools and professional achievement, scholastic hazing upholds this link by complexifying it. By rendering this connection at once less well-defined and more amenable to personally motivated forms of commitment, it makes it easier to communicate about this connection as a

self-reinforcing, inescapable feature of the (social) world. In a word, hazing contributes to the naturalization of social and educational inequalities, or as Bourdieu would say, to their “institutionalization”.

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